



The Terrorist Exodus: Resurgent Radicalism & The Threat To The West

Chairman Michael McCaul at the George Washington University

- Remarks as Prepared -

Two years ago, FBI Director James Comey testified before my Committee to warn that we needed to brace ourselves for a “terrorist diaspora” out of Syria and Iraq. Thousands of Western foreign fighters had gone to the conflict zone, and he shared our concern that eventually they would come home as battle-hardened extremists.

Last week I returned from leading a Congressional Delegation to the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe to assess the terror threat. And our findings were sobering.

The “diaspora” has now begun. Thousands of Western foreign fighters have returned home, and operatives are being dispatched from Syria to conduct attacks. But the problem is much larger than that. A worldwide terrorist exodus is underway, and we are woefully unprepared to deal with it. Extremists are going forth to all corners of the globe—to establish safe havens, to inspire followers, and to advance a mortal threat against our people and our way of life.

We have entered a new phase in the war against Islamist terror, and in many ways the tide has turned against us. Nearly 15 years after 9/11, our enemies have regained their momentum and are opening up new fronts well beyond the foreign battlefields to which they were once confined. Our own city streets are becoming the frontlines as a resurgent radicalism spreads further into the heart of the Western world.

Today I want to provide an update on this long war, discuss the rise of terror sanctuaries that are being used as staging grounds for new waves of extremists, and close with some thoughts about how we can strike back and—ultimately—how we can prevail in this generational struggle.

First, let’s be frank about the enemy we face. We are fighting Islamist terrorists. These fanatics have perverted a peaceful religion into a hateful worldview. And while their beliefs do not represent the views of mainstream Muslims, we cannot pretend they are not driven by an ideology or that their violence is random. They represent a dangerous global movement with a vision for undermining open societies and a desire to subjugate millions under their barbaric rule.

We are engaged in hostilities with these radicals, but let me give you the “bottom line” upfront: we are not winning the war, and violent extremists are not “on the run” as the President claims. They are on the march and expanding at great cost to the free world. Today we worry about more than just terrorist cells, we worry about full-fledged terrorist armies as they capture territory and enlist thousands to join their ranks. In Syria and Iraq, for instance, we are witnessing the largest global convergence of Islamist terrorists in modern history.

Just look at the numbers. More than 40,000 aspiring jihadists have entered the conflict zone, providing groups like ISIS with a larger fighting force than entire nation-states like Denmark or Norway. And in some ways, terrorists have put together a broader coalition than the one trying to defeat them. At last count, we have brought together 66 countries to fight terror in Syria. But jihadists from more than 120 countries have gone to join the fight on the other side.



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The result is that ISIS is now more dangerous than al Qaeda was under Osama bin Laden. In fact, the group has been linked to almost 90 terrorist plots to attack Western targets since 2014—an unprecedented figure. This new generation of terrorists has franchised their violence by “crowd-sourcing” attacks through social media and recruiting through tweets. These tactics represent a lethal evolution in our enemies’ ability to spread destruction. As I speak, ISIS operatives in Syria are breaching our borders digitally to enlist Americans.

But they are also relying on more traditional—and deadlier—methods. From Paris to Brussels, ISIS has started deploying skilled operatives to launch attacks. And I am worried we have only seen the tip of the iceberg. For example, the mastermind of the Paris attacks claims to have entered Europe with 90 fellow plotters, and I see little reason to doubt him.

During our recent trip, my delegation conferred with British partners, who are well aware that the European continent is wide open to terror threats. They share our concerns that Europe is in a “pre-9/11” mindset—from border security to intelligence sharing. We are working to help our allies improve their capabilities, but I don’t know if we can act fast enough. ISIS cells are operating right now in multiple European countries, and even disrupt them all, the group has a reserve of thousands of fighters with Western passports.

Although our nation is shielded by two oceans, geography alone cannot protect us, and I believe the U.S. homeland is now in the highest terror threat environment since 2001. Today the FBI is investigating 1,000 homegrown terror cases—80 percent of which are ISIS-related—across all 50 states. And in the past two years, federal authorities have arrested more than 80 ISIS supporters here in our country. In fact, in 2015 we saw the highest number of homegrown terror plots we have ever tracked in a single year.

ISIS alone has already been tied to roughly two-dozen terrorist plots in the United States, including the massacre in San Bernardino. Luckily, many of those were thwarted, but the group has more in the pipeline. They aspire to pull off Paris and Brussels-style attacks here in the homeland, and we believe they are determined to hit us again this year.

The upward trend of terror is tied to a proliferation of safe havens. In fact, today there are more terror sanctuaries worldwide than we have ever seen. Islamist militants are fanning out East and West in search of lawless vacuums and sympathetic regions where they can establish their forward-operating bases to recruit, train, and plot.

Our trip to the Middle East allowed us to get an update on the counter-ISIS campaign taking place in the group’s primary safe haven, Syria and Iraq. We visited the USS Harry Truman aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, where our sailors and airmen are launching sorties daily to destroy ISIS positions. While I am proud of their efforts, I am not encouraged by our progress.

Simply put, we have failed to commit the resources needed to win the fight. The President is sticking to a “drip, drip” doctrine that is more suited for losing a war than winning one. Although we were briefed on his incremental troop increases and accelerated efforts, the changes are too little, too late. Each day that the safe haven in Syria and Iraq persists, ISIS advances its murderous agenda, exporting terror across the globe. A half-measured response provides these fanatics with the time and space to dig in for the long haul.



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Two years into the fight, our Iraqi partners are making some progress in clearing ISIS outposts, but I worry they cannot hold the territory they take back. And in Syria, we still do not have a coherent ground force. The President's original strategy—a \$500-million program to train and equip local rebels—has been suspended because it failed miserably to train or equip anyone capable of confronting ISIS. In the meantime, the Iranian-Russian intervention has strengthened Assad, which our commanders privately admit has benefitted ISIS.

But even as terrorists lose some ground in Syria and Iraq, globally they are gaining new ground. ISIS and its affiliates are present in nearly 20 countries, from Algeria to the Philippines. And as they expand, so does the danger to our people and our allies.

My Delegation also traveled to North Africa to assess the second-largest ISIS stronghold—Libya—where developments are also discouraging. In the past year, the number of ISIS fighters in the country has doubled to nearly 6,000. Part of the increase is owed to the fact that ISIS territories are increasingly interconnected, giving the Libya branch access to extra resources and foot soldiers.

After meeting with our embassy personnel and security services, the takeaway was clear: it is time to wake up. ISIS has vowed to use Libyan soil as a launching pad to strike the West, and we should take them at their word. We know for a fact they have planned external operations from Libya against U.S. and Western targets, yet our response has been piecemeal at best.

The President rejected a Pentagon plan earlier this year for a more aggressive counter-ISIS campaign in Libya, opting instead for occasional airstrikes and an emphasis on political reconciliation in the war-torn country. But we cannot count on the central government to bring the situation under control. Even the UN's top diplomat in Libya admitted to us that the country remains a failed state, and I believe the prospects are low that its warring factions will unite to defeat ISIS anytime soon.

White House inaction on Libya will have serious consequences. This is the kind of grudging reluctance that allowed Syria to become the most dangerous terror sanctuary in modern history, and now we are poised to repeat the same mistakes of the recent past. If we act early enough, we can start to degrade ISIS in a matter of months, but if we act too late, it could take years.

Sadly, Libya's neighbors are also unprepared to deal with the terrorists. We visited Tunisia—the Arab Spring's only real success story—and met with the President and Prime Minister who are struggling to handle the chaos spilling over from next door. ISIS is seeking to gain a foothold in their country, but the Tunisians have put up a fight. However, they still face an uphill climb to protect their fragile democracy.

We visited the country's famous Bardo Museum, where two Libyan-trained ISIS operatives conducted a massacre last year, and we saw how such attacks have decimated Tunisia's tourist industry and threatened stability. It is clear that we must continue providing security assistance to governments like Tunisia because, if we do not, ISIS could exploit the volatility and expand its influence even further.

To Libya's east, the government in Egypt is preoccupied with containing another ISIS province in the Sinai Peninsula. This terror safe haven also poses a serious and mounting threat, as we saw last fall when ISIS blew up a Russian jetliner departing the region, an attack which was originally meant



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for a British passenger jet. The group has upwards of 1,500 fighters, and while their capabilities are more limited, they clearly have the willingness and intent to conduct external operations.

The Delegation traveled into the heart of ISIS territory in northern Sinai to meet with our troops, who are stationed there as part of a longstanding peacekeeping operation between Egypt and Israel. While they are not on a counterterrorism mission, they have found themselves in the crossfire as ISIS has grown stronger. In fact, the situation has become so serious that our military is looking to reduce its footprint, particularly after four soldiers were injured in an IED attack last fall.

We discussed this emerging terror safe haven with President Sisi, and while he takes the danger seriously, I am concerned his Egyptian forces do not have the situation under control. They have not fully contained ISIS in the Sinai and have failed to adopt a counter-insurgency strategy to scale it back. What's worse, the group is deepening its ties throughout the region, making it stronger and deadlier. The clock is ticking, which is why America must work more closely with our Egyptian partners to clear this extremist hotspot quickly and decisively.

Let me be clear: ISIS is not the only terror outfit with a growing footprint. While we have been occupied with the so-called Islamic State, al Qaeda has quietly bolstered its own territory through its Syrian affiliate, al Nusra Front. The group has been sending veteran terrorist operatives into the country with possible plans to establish a new emirate, a move that could reinvigorate al Qaeda and accelerate its plotting against our interests and our homeland. What's more, al Qaeda's most lethal external operations branch, AQAP, has expanded its control in Yemen, where an ongoing civil war has diminished our ability to monitor the group.

But of all of the terror sanctuaries springing up around the globe, the most dangerous is the one we can't see. Instead of migrating to overseas training grounds, many radicals are "going dark" and finding shelter in virtual safe havens. Gone are the days of Bin Laden, when terrorists plotted using couriers and caves. Instead, they are using encrypted applications to inspire others—and to conspire with each other—online and across borders, all while evading detection.

As a former federal prosecutor, I know that if you can't see the communications, you can't easily stop the criminals. As we saw in Garland, Texas last May, the first sign of a plot might be an internet hashtag, tweeted only minutes before the attack. Or it might be like Paris, where ISIS went entirely under the radar before murdering 130 people. In both of these attacks, the plotters relied on end-to-end encryption to prevent law enforcement from seeing their communications.

ISIS is urging its supporters to follow suit, and lately we have seen them "go darker," as they not only encrypt their communications but disguise their locations and ISPs. I am moving a proposal through Congress to address the "going dark" challenge, but I fear that at the current pace, we will see another attack before we see a solution enacted.

I want to close this afternoon with a few words on what it will take to win the wider war against Islamist terror. We face an enemy whose ultimate goal is to conquer territory, destroy free societies, and enforce its evil vision through fear, intimidation, rape, and murder.

So how do we confront this menace? Overall, we need a military strategy to destroy terrorists on the ground, a political strategy to deny them any chance to reemerge, and a counter-narrative to defeat them in the war of ideas.



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As for the military strategy, we must take the fight to the enemy so that we do not have to fight them here at home. And our policy cannot be mere “containment.” It must be total “rollback.” The territory held by terrorists fuels their narrative and allows them to project violence, and that is why it must be recaptured. ISIS and al Qaeda are now embedded across the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond—and we need decisive action to eradicate them, whether it is in Syria and Iraq, or places like Libya and the Sinai Peninsula.

Wherever possible we should rely on local forces, and if necessary we should train and equip them to confront terrorists. But we cannot take options off the table or openly refuse to commit U.S. troops and firepower to the fight, because doing so broadcasts weakness to our enemies and emboldens them. Instead, we should resolve to step up even where others will not—and use whatever means necessary to defeat extremists.

We must also deny terrorists safe haven by tackling threats early. Our nation learned this lesson after 9/11, yet we failed to heed it during the rise of ISIS. Right now we can see the consequences of delay: terrorists have the wind at their backs and they are putting the crosshairs on ours. We cannot afford to hesitate, nor can we afford to play global whack-a-mole with these fanatics. We must identify emerging sanctuaries and implement strategies with our allies to keep them from becoming extremist hotbeds.

As for the political strategy, it is important that we help create the conditions for lasting success. Once terrorist groups are defeated on the ground, foreign governments face the difficult and abiding task of keeping them at bay. As we have seen, it can be easier to make peace than to keep it, so we must help our allies through shrewd diplomacy and sustained support. Terrorists exploit political and religious grievances and they thrive in power vacuums, which is why the stability of foreign countries is so important to the security of our own.

Finally, we must champion a counter-narrative. Radicalism’s motive power is ideology, and defeating it requires more than just bullets and bombs. It requires the force of our ideas. Terrorists are killing with a purpose, and as corrupt as their vision is, we have seen it spread like a wildfire. Most immediately, we should empower real Muslims to speak out against the murderers hijacking their religion. And we should expose the insidious ideology at the core of Islamist terror through counter-messaging campaigns and credible voices.

But in the long run, America must advance a more powerful alternative to militant Islam by recognizing that this is not about Sunni terror or Shiite extremism. Both ideologies fall into a single category: tyranny. And like fascists and communists before them, our enemies detest individual liberty, scorn political freedom, and seek to impose their views on the unwilling. Ultimately, this fight is—and has always been—the continuation of a struggle between the forces of tyranny and the forces of freedom. And we know how to prevail in that battle because our ideas prevail. But this requires more than just our rhetoric. It demands our steadfast action.

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So with terror sweeping the globe, what choice will America make?

Will we continue a policy of reluctance and retrenchment, or will we lean forward into a fight that can only be won with our leadership?



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The eyes of the world are upon us, and certainly not for the first time. I was reminded of this last week when touring the underground bunkers where Winston Churchill oversaw military operations during the Second World War. On the eve of that conflict, he admitted that the destinies of an entire generation depended on American action.

Churchill wrote: "Will the United States throw their weight into the scales of peace and law and freedom while time remains, or will they remain spectators until the disaster has occurred; and then, with infinite cost and labor, build up what need not have been cast down?"

The question is echoed again today. And I personally believe America cannot be a spectator while terrorists plot across borders and while the world burns at the hands of our enemies. My father took the fight to the Nazis as a bombardier in World War II, and if men like that had sat on their hands while fascism and communism spread, the world would be unrecognizable today. By the same token, if we let radical Islamists gain further ground, we will be talking about a struggle that lasts for more than just a generation.

America is called upon to lead—with our allies if we can, but alone if we must—and with the protection of our homeland as the highest priority. And we should send a clear message to our enemies: as you are plotting to bring terror to us, we are planning to bring justice to you. No matter who seeks to divide us, Americans stand united—in defense of our freedoms and in defiance of those to seek to undermine them.

Thank you.